



Estudos Teológicos foi licenciado com uma Licença Creative Commons –  
Atribuição – NãoComercial – SemDerivados 3.0 Não Adaptada

<http://dx.doi.org/10.22351/et.v60i2.3993>

## HOW SHOULD WE SUFFER?

### MEDITATING ON CHRISTIAN RESPONSES TO THE PROBLEM OF SUFFERING<sup>1</sup>

*Como devemos sofrer?*

*Meditando sobre respostas cristãs ao problema do sofrimento*

Colby H. Dickinson<sup>2</sup>

**Abstract:** Despite the irreducible non-equivalence of individual experiences of suffering, there is a solidarity possible among sufferers especially during times of collective crisis. This essay focuses on the suffering of the disciple Peter in order to formulate a model for suffering that resonates deeply with other, more recent accounts. Peter's suffering is linked with Bryan Stevenson's *Just Mercy*, as well as the work of certain German political theologians, in order to show how it is our human inability to adequately respond to suffering that gives us the existential vulnerability we need in order to stand in solidarity with others who suffer too—the primal element of Christian love. At a precarious time when so many feel a vulnerability perhaps never felt before, such vulnerability potentially transforms us into more responsible social agents and political actors.

**Keywords:** Suffering. Vulnerability. Solidarity. Apostle Peter. Bryan Stevenson.

**Resumo:** Apesar da irredutível não equivalência de experiências individuais de sofrimento, existe uma solidariedade possível entre os que sofrem, especialmente em tempos de crise coletiva. Este ensaio aborda o sofrimento do discípulo Pedro, visando conceber um modelo de sofrimento que ressoe profundamente com outros relatos mais recentes. Liga-se, aqui, o sofrimento de Pedro à obra “Luta por Justiça”, de Bryan Stevenson, bem como ao trabalho de certos teólogos políticos alemães, a fim de mostrar nossa inabilidade, enquanto seres humanos, de responder adequadamente ao sofrimento que nos dá a vulnerabilidade existencial de que precisamos para sermos solidários com outros que também sofrem – o elemento primordial do amor cristão. Em um momento precário em que tantos sentem uma vulnerabilidade talvez nunca sentida antes, ela potencialmente nos transforma em agentes sociais e atores políticos mais responsáveis.

**Palavras-chave:** Sofrimento. Vulnerabilidade. Solidariedade. Apóstolo Pedro. Bryan Stevenson.

<sup>1</sup> O artigo foi recebido em 09 de maio de 2020 e aprovado em 18 de agosto de 2020 com base nas avaliações dos pareceristas *ad hoc*.

<sup>2</sup> Doutor. Loyola University Chicago. E-mail: [cdickinson1@luc.edu](mailto:cdickinson1@luc.edu)

## Introduction

From my time teaching secondary school some years ago, I recall a student who had lost her mother after a long, protracted struggle with an illness. After missing school for a couple weeks, she returned to a silent and somewhat dumbfounded classroom that scrambled for words with which to address her. We sat in the silence for a moment, before another student spoke up, saying that she too had lost her mother and she therefore knew how the student felt. With a calm, but steely gaze, the student responded by saying that, even if she too had lost her mother, she would never know how it felt to be in her position and to lose *her* mother. The classroom was stunned into silence, yet this particular student could not have been more accurate in her description.

There is a non-equivalence to the experience of suffering that renders all attempts to define the equivalence of suffering *in general* as more than slightly problematic. We cannot simply assume that our suffering, much like one's experience of love and so as also unique to our life context, has any equivalence to another's suffering. There may be some family resemblances between those who are suffering, to be sure, but to claim that one can 'understand' another's suffering fails to comprehend what is ultimately incomprehensible within every experience of suffering—that is, the way in which suffering makes us vulnerable to what we do not know, and so what we cannot control comes to define the experience. In many ways, the uncontrollable nature of that which causes us to suffer—because how many of us would rightly wish to undergo suffering?—reveals our vulnerability in a way that forces us either to come to terms with our precarious existence or to refuse to acknowledge that part of ourselves that makes us human.

Though it is true that many people reject the idea of God in their lives when they experience suffering, why do Christians, whose God is a God who suffers *with* humanity, too often follow suit? In this time of global pandemic brought about by Covid-19, we must continue to ask a theological question that has never stopped being posed throughout history: Shouldn't Christians embrace a God who suffers as well when they too suffer? And what are the implications of such belief during a chaotic time of collective suffering?

Welcoming suffering into one's life can be, for some Christians, a misguided goal, linking religious faith with a bleak outlook on life that ends with Christians all-too-often legitimating injustice and not seeking to alleviate the suffering that does take place in our world. At a time today when the state of quarantine most of us are living under forces us to ask questions about how the 'least among us' are being treated by underfunded, negligent or even corrupt governments and healthcare systems, we must be re-centered on the nature of suffering itself, and our role in collective suffering, through a repeated meditation upon those guideposts that help to frame the question of suffering within a proper Christian perspective.

In what follows, I want to focus on the disciple Peter and the suffering he undergoes in order to provide a model for suffering that resonates deeply with other, more recent accounts. I link Peter's suffering with Bryan Stevenson's memoir *Just Mercy* and the failures of the penal system in the United States, as well as various

political theologians and their accounts of theodicy, in order to illuminate how it is our inability to ever adequately respond to suffering that gives us the existential vulnerability we need in order to stand in solidarity with others who suffer too. At this precarious time when so many of us feel a vulnerability we have perhaps never felt before, it is imperative to pay attention to how such vulnerability potentially transforms us into more responsible social agents and political actors.

## The legacy of suffering in the life of Peter

According to the apocryphal *Acts of Peter*, the disciple Peter's martyrdom should have been a moment of great suffering. He was arrested and crucified during the reign of the Roman Emperor Nero, possibly then during one of the early purges of those Christians who were living in Rome at the time. In this legendary tradition, Peter is said to have attempted to flee from Rome in order to escape persecution before encountering a vision of Jesus on the Via Appia that stunned him by simply asking him 'Quo Vadis?', or 'Where are you going?' Jesus was, he himself had said, going into Rome to be crucified again, a statement that apparently and dramatically stopped Peter from fleeing and prompted him to accept his own personal destiny, to return to Rome and be subject to crucifixion himself. The encounter bore enough symbolic gravity that Jesus' feet were allegedly pressed firmly into the stone beneath him, an image preserved at San Sebastiano *fuori le mura* (Saint Sebastian 'outside the walls'), a nearby Church.

After Peter's arrest, and just before he was exposed to the means that would bring about his death, Peter is said to have asked his executioners to let him experience his crucifixion upside down, as he did not feel worthy to die in the same manner as Jesus had—a sign of his humility, but also of his acceptance of the situation.

Peter's reception of his martyrdom, in the face of much suffering inflicted upon both himself and many other early Christians in the nascent Church—indeed, these were the believers upon whom some of the greatest tortures in history were inflicted—gives us pause to consider how much suffering Peter actually felt he was undergoing. For instance, is it suffering that one experiences when the distress, pain or hardship one endures is embraced rather than shunned? Was this type of welcomed death a form of suffering? Or was this suffering to be counted 'as nothing' since the loss he suffered here was on behalf of Jesus?

Peter's death was perhaps somewhat resonate with Paul's claim in Acts that his life was 'worth nothing' to him, his 'only aim' being 'to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the good news of God's grace' (Acts 20:24), something that takes place without necessarily a consideration of the suffering that one might undergo. Lest we forget, Paul is the one who counsels his fellow Christians by boasting of his own suffering (2 Corinthians 11.16-33) and by rejoicing in it because it produces perseverance, character and ultimately hope (Romans 5.3-10). Paul was no stranger to suffering, and we might suspect that Peter, at this point in his life, was no stranger to it either.

But what are we to make of the suffering that Peter underwent when he was crucified in comparison to what he felt when he denied Jesus? What kind of suffering did he experience in this denial and how might it compare with the suffering at his death? This is a question less often asked, but perhaps more relevant to the present inquiry if we are to access a Christian response to suffering today in the midst of a global health crisis. The question I want to ask about Peter's suffering after he denied Christ three times is: how does this suffering measure or clarify the suffering that a good many of us feel we undergo in our everyday lives?

The story of Peter's denial of Jesus is, of course, familiar enough:

Then they seized him and led him away, bringing him into the high priest's house. But Peter was following at a distance. When they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and sat down together, Peter sat among them. Then a servant-girl, seeing him in the firelight, stared at him and said, "This man also was with him." But he denied it, saying, "Woman, I do not know him." A little later someone else, on seeing him, said, "You also are one of them." But Peter said, "Man, I am not!" Then about an hour later still another kept insisting, "Surely this man also was with him; for he is a Galilean." But Peter said, "Man, I do not know what you are talking about!" At that moment, while he was still speaking, the cock crowed. The Lord turned and looked at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said to him, "Before the cock crows today, you will deny me three times." And he went out and wept bitterly.

If we recall, Peter had been willing to fight for Christ, even to die for Christ. He brought his sword to the fight in the garden and had even cut off a soldier's ear in an act of defensive aggression. He made abundantly clear that he was ready to suffer greatly on behalf of a cause (perhaps understood as one undertaken for social, political and religious freedom), and so in Christ's defense. In fact, he might even have considered himself not to be suffering at all, but fully immersed in an act of potential martyrdom, hence not so much suffering as honored to die for something that meant a good deal to him. (One might imagine here the many causes and protests that Christians sometimes take up because they feel a social or political injustice is being done to them—often embraced as a valiant effort in a particular context's 'culture wars'—though it is clearly not something that arises out of a sense of solidarity with those others who are sick or suffering.)

In this sense, we have an uneasy parallel between Peter's willingness to die in the garden fighting for Christ and his actual death through crucifixion, while also undergoing another sort of 'fight' for Christ. At points throughout history, as one can imagine, there has been a certain overlap between the stories and languages of peaceful martyrdom and that of militant fighters. Though there may be a great distinction between them in terms of their relationship to violent action, there may also be a strong similarity in terms of their rejecting a discourse of suffering to describe what they undergo.

The question we have to ask, then, concerns the point at which genuine suffering takes place in Peter's life, but which seems at a certain remove from all the fighting and death—the point at which he breaks down and weeps bitterly. The suffering, it would seem, *accompanies a certain disillusionment*. Perhaps the situation that arose

was, in some strange way, the suffering that Christ asked Peter to undergo, and that which Jesus had foreseen as bound up with the future of a man who had so frequently misunderstood the nature of Jesus' mission and teaching.

For years, in fact, Peter had miscalculated the nature of Jesus' messianic proclamation, expecting a military and revolutionary leader in place of what he actually beheld before his eyes. The hopes and dreams that Peter had fostered along with the other disciples—that legions of angel armies might descend upon ancient Palestine to remove Roman occupation, for example—were shattered when the centerpiece of their political aspirations was killed like a common criminal. It was at this point that Peter could truly say that he didn't know Jesus, that he didn't know the man he had thought he knew because he apparently didn't know him in a certain sense—a fact that adds an ironic twist to Peter's denials of the Christ. But Jesus had already seen this coming: to so willfully misunderstand Jesus' mission for so long could only lead to disillusionment and desertion, once the realization of Jesus' all-too-obvious 'weakness' hit home. It was at this precise moment, however, that Jesus asked Peter to face himself, to look deeper into his own motives and to find an inner path toward a transformation that Peter had already failed time and again to grasp.

On the mountaintop where Jesus was transfigured before his eyes, Peter had misunderstood what was happening, offering to build three booths for Jesus, Moses and Elijah, missing the point of Jesus' becoming as radiant as Moses had been on top of Mount Sinai when he had received the Law from God. What Peter had missed was that this wasn't a moment that foreshadowed the coming of a new Law—rather the new Law was now standing before him, was in Peter's very presence, and he could not recognize it for what it was.

Once Peter had subsequently denied Christ three times, only then had the Lord turned to look at him. Only when Peter had admitted to himself that he was broken and that the illusions he had fostered about Jesus had not been what he had so badly wanted them to be, did the space of vulnerability open up within him that could allow the presence of God to find him—a point that certainly underlies the life of prayer and intimacy that Christians seek to cultivate in their spiritual lives.

Only after facing the suffering that he had brought upon himself, and in his disillusionment with the ways in which his constructed life had failed to achieve what he had sought so desperately to claim for himself, is Peter able to face other forms of suffering that he once might have thought he could not handle, ones where a sword would do him no good. Indeed, once Peter has faced his own brokenness, he has no use for the sword, which would only serve to re-inscribe him back within the struggles for power that have no place within God's Kingdom.

What Peter discovered, I think, is that it is in such moments of suffering, of bitter tears in fact, that we are most capable of glimpsing the face of God. Peter sees God, who turned to look directly at him, once he had seen his own failure to truly suffer on behalf of Jesus, to stand at the foot of the cross and to risk his life (as the beloved disciple, perhaps an idealized type, had done, and as certainly the women following him had done). It is only at this point, after being willing to suffer the loss of his illusions, that Peter is able to go out from the crowd, stand alone, and in this solitude and

isolation, weep bitterly. At a time when many of us are facing a sense of isolation and alienation that we have perhaps never before felt, this is no small point to emphasize.

It would not be a stretch of the imagination to suggest that Peter suffered at that moment, that he indeed suffered bitterly, and that this is why the Gospel records this event as such. The suffering and bitterness that we are told about seem in fact to be far greater, and more believable, than either the possible suffering in the garden on behalf of a false idea of Jesus or the martyrdom on Jesus' behalf that can be borne only because there is nothing left to fight for—the transfiguration and transformation through suffering had already taken place. We would ignore the reality of Peter's denial and suffering if we claimed that such suffering were not also somehow capable of being transformative, in the sense that perhaps God calls all Christians to undergo so that their own vulnerability might become transformative of the world as a whole.

Of course, a continuous meditation must be made as well on the women who wept at Jesus' feet—including Mary his mother, a sister of Mary, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joseph and the mother of the sons of Zebedee, Joanna, Salome, Mary the wife of Clopas, and perhaps others as well—as they felt the suffering without illusions and took significant personal risks to do so. In many ways, they continue to provide a significant testimony to the ways in which women have historically, and scripturally, borne through suffering without illusions in order to abide with those with whom they share an intimacy in relationship, as all believers are called to do.

## **The vulnerable claims of mercy**

I want, however, to contemplate Peter's suffering and Peter's brokenness at this point alongside a more recent act of weeping bitterly in solitude, a scene that unfolds in Bryan Stevenson's *Just Mercy*, a memoir on the failures of the prison system in America and one man's quest to mediate and act on the brokenness and awareness of injustice in society. In one particular scene, what I consider to be the pinnacle of the book's argument, Stevenson sits alone in his office after hearing a kind word of thanks from a man scheduled to be executed soon and whose life Stevenson had been unable to help sustain any longer. Caught up in the realization that this was the last time he would speak with the man, and that he had been rendered powerless by a broken justice system to prevent this man's death, Stevenson breaks down and genuinely contemplates whether or not he has the strength to continue doing this work any longer:

When I hung up the phone that night I had a wet face and a broken heart. The lack of compassion I witnessed every day had finally exhausted me. I looked around my crowded office, at the stacks of records and papers, each pile with tragic stories, and I suddenly didn't want to be surrounded by all this anguish and misery. As I sat there, I

thought myself a fool for having tried to fix situations that were so fatally broken. *It's time to stop. I can't do this anymore.*<sup>3</sup>

The difficulty, from this perspective on the other side of things, was not an idealistic, romanticized portrait being stripped from him as Peter had been forced to face through his disillusionment. Stevenson was all too aware of the reality before him and how it was capable of breaking him. It was something else that crept into his mind than what had once gone through Peter's: 'For the first time I realized that my life was just full of brokenness. I worked in a broken system of justice. My clients were broken by mental illness, poverty, and racism'. Stevenson looked around him at this point in his life and saw little but 'disease, drugs and alcohol, pride, fear, and anger'.<sup>4</sup> He saw the constraints of prison, broken childhoods, the ravages of war, poverty and disability, accompanied by 'cynicism, hopelessness, and prejudice'.<sup>5</sup> As he would put it,

My years of struggling against inequality, abusive power, poverty, oppression, and injustice had finally revealed something to me about myself. Being close to suffering, death, executions, and cruel punishments didn't just illuminate the brokenness of others; in a moment of anguish and heartbreak, it also exposed my own brokenness. You can't effectively fight abusive power, poverty, inequality, illness, oppression, or injustice and not be broken by it.<sup>6</sup>

Stevenson's call is to recognize and embrace our own brokenness, despite its non-equivalence with other people's brokenness and suffering *or* make a deliberate choice to 'deny our brokenness, forswear compassion, and, as a result, deny our own humanity'.<sup>7</sup> In stark terms, what Peter hadn't gotten until after his own disillusionment was the reality that it is only by accepting one's brokenness, as Jesus had taught him (even *was* teaching him at the moment of his death), that one can see the realities of this world and yet somehow not be broken by them.

What we hear from Stevenson concerning this brokenness, I would suggest, is pure theological declaration: 'I had a notion that if we acknowledged our brokenness, we could no longer take pride in mass incarceration, in executing people, in our deliberate indifference to the most vulnerable'.<sup>8</sup> From Peter's perspective, it is only once he faces his own brokenness, after he weeps bitterly, that he is able to put down the sword and work for mercy in the lives of others, even up to the point of his own death.

As the historian Larry Siedentop has persuasively argued, the earliest Christians redefined heroism in the ancient world, elevating the status of women and slaves, inverting the social order and therefore posed a legitimate threat to the powers that be insofar as they were willing—as Saint Lawrence once was—to consider the poorest

---

<sup>3</sup> STEVENSON, Bryan. *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption*. New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2014. p. 288.

<sup>4</sup> STEVENSON, 2014, p. 288.

<sup>5</sup> STEVENSON, 2014, p. 288.

<sup>6</sup> STEVENSON, 2014, p. 289.

<sup>7</sup> STEVENSON, 2014, p. 289.

<sup>8</sup> STEVENSON, 2014, p. 291.

of the poor as the real treasures of society worth protecting, not the gold and jewels so many Romans had prized.<sup>9</sup> The Christian martyr defied society while the political revolutionary might only reinforce another, different image of it. Peter had made the remarkable journey from the latter to the former and so was willing to lay down his life for those less fortunate than himself. It was the suffering felt in his own brokenness that had gained him access.

As we face an incredibly isolating moment in history brought about through a global pandemic, we are faced not only with our own vulnerability, but our sheer inability to assist others who are suffering. But, to follow Stevenson's logic, it is only through getting in touch with our own precariousness and brokenness, our inability and vulnerability, that we might be able to find a better way forward. In Stevenson's summation,

The power of just mercy is that it belongs to the undeserving. It's when mercy is least expected that is most potent—strong enough to break the cycle of victimization and victimhood, retribution and suffering. It has the power to heal the psychic harm and injuries that lead to aggression and violence, abuse of power, mass incarceration.<sup>10</sup>

This mercy, much as Pope Francis has more recently and repeatedly signaled, contains the seeds to undo unjust suffering through the solidarity we might exhibit with one another. The denial of the ways we have institutionalized 'vengeful and cruel punishments' within our criminal system—but also, I would add, our healthcare and welfare systems—has taken us far from understanding what we should actually do with our own and others' brokenness: '[...] simply punishing the broken—walking away from them or hiding them from sight—only ensures that they remain broken and we do, too. There is no wholeness outside of our reciprocal humanity'.<sup>11</sup>

What the stories of both Peter and Bryan Stevenson illustrate for us is that suffering our own brokenness, an inevitable part of being human that many of us deny, can lead to a different perspective on the marginalized, as well as the systemic violence in our world that creates such groupings. This is to suggest as much as a series of reflections once given by Henri Nouwen on why those in impoverished 'third world' contexts, who suffer a good deal, are often happier than the depressed horde of privileged persons in the 'first world' who do not suffer as so many disenfranchised do.<sup>12</sup> There is much we could say about the failure to understand the difference between a suffering that is imposed upon people unjustly in the context of poverty (and which yet enables those who suffer in such cases to maintain no illusions about reality), and one that is brought upon oneself (by those who do not suffer materially, but at the cost of maintaining many illusions that they do not want to lose).

A majority of my own students, year after year, reject the idea (but not the actual presence) of God in their lives because God was seemingly not there to alleviate

---

<sup>9</sup> SIEDENTOP, Larry. *Inventing the Individual*. London: Penguin, 2015. p. 79-87.

<sup>10</sup> STEVENSON, 2014, p. 294.

<sup>11</sup> STEVENSON, 2014, p. 290.

<sup>12</sup> NOUWEN, Henri J. M. *The Road to Daybreak: A Spiritual Journey*. New York: Image, 1988.



their suffering or the suffering of someone they loved deeply. Their simplistic and yet powerful reflections are guided along their way by something like the problem of evil that Leibniz had contemplated centuries ago in his study of *Theodicy*, on the possibility of believing in God despite the existence of suffering and evil: if God is all-powerful, all-knowing and all-good, how could God allow suffering to happen at all? There must either be goodness in life to affirm a good God's existence and involvement in our world, or there must be no God. A good God would not allow unjust and meaningless suffering to take place?

These are abstractions of course, ones that take place at a remove from the Christian narrative, itself centrally focused on suffering and the problem of evil that we ironically, in reality, run the risk of missing the significance of. This is why such speculations don't really work with those who *are* suffering unjustly in our world. In reality, those who suffer deeply often find great solace in God—but precisely a God who suffers *with* them.

This is the lesson that the famed Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy once learned the hard way as well. At one point in his life, as he was suffering the intense pain of finding life meaningless despite his privilege, wealth and success as an author, he had the occasion to notice how the masses of uneducated, poor peasants who suffered and lost so much in material terms weren't nearly so depressed as he was. They seemed almost not to suffer emotionally or psychologically, though they suffered a great deal materially and physically. It seemed to him that the masses of the poorest of the poor know something that the most privileged among us do not: that God can be found, perhaps even is uniquely present among, the poor.

Perhaps the question we have yet to fully explore in the West, in practical, pastoral terms, is how does our presumption of an all-good, all-powerful, all-knowing God (the definition of sovereignty) fail to cohere with the vision of the 'crucified God' who died among the lowest criminals and lived with the poorest outcasts? Understanding the answer to this question might go a long way toward understanding why so many of us fail to perceive the presence of God in our (mostly) privileged lives, especially when we suffer the most.

To begin to answer such a question, we must first recognize that Christians often have great difficulty separating their different conceptions of God from one another. Christians have typically relied upon a particular conceptualization of a powerful and wrathful ('Old Testament') God, looking toward those jealous, violent, angry attributes they read as intervening in our world in order to execute God's wrath and judgment, (e.g. the Flood, Moses' wars, conquest of the Promised Land, and so forth). To focus exclusively on such images, however, is to miss the ways in which this image of God was itself already being challenged, even de-constructed, in the Hebrew Scriptures by the prophets and in the wisdom literature, often in very profound ways.

The story of Job, for example, a man whose friends show up after he suffers great losses in order to justify the apparent actions of God to him, is the story of a man whose defiant stance before God is not one so much of patience in the face of unexplainable and unjustified suffering, but of defiance. God's presence at the end of the story says as much: that Job was correct, he did not deserve the suffering he

underwent and whose pain cannot, *will not*, be taken away from him. By showing up and addressing Job, God actually witnesses to the unjust violence and suffering in our world.<sup>13</sup> Pain can be transformed, from within such a perspective, from being wholly meaningless into being something constitutive of a new humanity, despite its completely unjustifiable nature (as with Job's suffering). Job's insurrection against God—his 'ontological resistance', as some have put it—'admits the failure and inadequacy of old standards of justice', offering us the failure of God's violence and perceived strength at the same time as it promises new solidarities among those who suffer for no apparent reason.<sup>14</sup> This reconfiguration of the oldest theological themes on suffering is Job's testament to humanity and what ultimately lays the foundations for Jesus's later reconfiguration of the law—the very transfiguration that Peter had missed the first time around.

The larger question Christians have to ask when prompted by such reflections, is: What does the perception of Jesus as also being God do to this image of a God who inflicts suffering on the world (not to mention what does the idea of the Trinity do here in terms of a perpetual unsettling of our notions of a monolithic deity)? How does Jesus' willingness to undergo suffering alter one's perception of God in relation to suffering? The abstract divine being whose existence appears to be at odds with, or even the cause of, evil and suffering is, of course, not the God that Christians worship. Jesus was a God who welcomed suffering into his life, who stood in solidarity with those who suffer, and in fact reversed one's understanding of the role of suffering in this world, as he took the suffering on himself in order to depict a different relationship of God to humanity. But the very thought that God would not intercede to prevent suffering—a point that overlooks whatever meaning was, and is, gained from Jesus' willingness to enter into suffering—is enough for many people to overlook the reality of how Christians are called to encounter God through a renewed understanding of suffering. Perhaps what Christians must learn to talk about directly when they talk about suffering, then—in whatever form it takes—are the myriad ways one chooses to live in their illusions and thereby refuse to see the suffering of others already happening all around them.

The emphasis Christians must place upon Jesus' suffering and death on the cross is what must lead one forward, as it once compelled the German theologian Jürgen Moltmann to write about the 'Crucified God'. The point that Moltmann emphasized with great significance was that prayer, as an entrance into the life of God, can be a simple form of wish-fulfillment for many, an illusion that refuses to see reality. *Or* it can be an entrance into the passion of God and a sharing of the divine life *with* God, *in* God's suffering.<sup>15</sup> Without God's capacity to suffer as a human being there is no in-

<sup>13</sup> See Jeffrey Robbins contribution to *An Insurrectionist Manifesto: Four New Gospels for a Radical Politics*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2016. p. 130.

<sup>14</sup> ROBBINS, 2016, p. 132, 131; see also Noëlle Vahanian's essay also in *An Insurrectionist Manifesto*, p. 171.

<sup>15</sup> MOLTSMANN, Jürgen. *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*. Trans. R. A. Wilson and John Bowden. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1993. p. 313.

volvement of the divine in the life of humanity; in short, to suffer is to love, despite the vulnerability and brokenness it brings to the surface in the individual, and in God.<sup>16</sup>

Alongside Moltmann's reflections, I would like to contemplate another German theologian Dorothee Soelle, whose comments on suffering, as with Moltmann's, were formed in the crucible of the Second World War and the untold suffering that took place in Germany at the time. As she described her own context:

Precisely those who in suffering experience the strength of the weak, who incorporate the suffering into their lives, for whom coming through free of suffering is no longer the highest goal, precisely they are there for the others who, with no choice in the matter, are crucified in lives of senseless suffering. A different salvation, as the language of metaphysics could promise it, is no longer possible. The God who causes suffering is not to be justified even by lifting the suffering later. No heaven can rectify Auschwitz. But the God who is not a greater Pharaoh has justified himself: in sharing the suffering, in sharing the death on the cross.<sup>17</sup>

This affirmation of a God who suffers with us instead of a God who inflicts or somehow controls the suffering in our world is a much-needed corrective to an image of God who reigns sovereign over our world in a capricious manner. Trying to serve a God who predestines every action in the entire world, and so is often only viewed through an abstracted metaphysical lens, is an attempt to assert one's own sovereign power, not God's. This is why Soelle must emphasize that God is 'not a greater Pharaoh', but one who has poured their own being out (the ultimate *kenotic* act) to the point of death.

We can change the social conditions under which people experience suffering. We can change ourselves and learn in suffering instead of becoming worse. We can gradually beat back and abolish the suffering that still today is produced for the profit of a few. But on all these paths we come up against boundaries that cannot be crossed. Death is not the only such barrier. There are also brutalization and insensibility, mutilation and injury that no longer can be reversed. The only way these boundaries can be crossed is by sharing the pain of the sufferers with them, not leaving them alone and making their cry louder.<sup>18</sup>

I hear the voice of Bryan Stevenson in these reflections loudly and clearly. It is only through the brokenness, its admittance and one's willingness to be seen as broken creatures that humanity might glimpse, as Peter once did, the face of God turning to look at them. To resist this most human of actions is to embrace a political and personal outlook that denies such a reality, a path that many do frequently consider when they don't want to lose the sovereign power associated with being able to control the world, with being able to extend their power into moments of suffering in order (even if only as a possibility) to take them away.

---

<sup>16</sup> MOLTSMANN, 1993, p. 222-223.

<sup>17</sup> SOELLE, Dorothee. *Suffering*. Trans. Everett R. Kalin. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1984. p. 148-149.

<sup>18</sup> SOELLE, 1984, p. 178.

Like the rich person who can easily donate money to alleviate some particular form of poverty, but who cannot let go of their death grip upon their personal finances, we want a God who is merciful while also being in total control of the situation. We want God to be like this, and *we* want to be like this, but this isn't how God works. The story of Jesus makes clear: this was never actually how God works in one's life. It is only when you feel utterly helpless because you grasp the fullness of your own vulnerability that you can step closer to God, because it is only then that you can step closer to others who are facing, or are forced to face, their own vulnerability as well.

Recall if you will the ultimate pass that Jesus gave in a moment that could've been his ultimate triumph. Upon his resurrection, Jesus did not appear to Pilate or to the Chief Priest or the Pharisees in order to demonstrate to them how he was actually in control of the situation. He showed up to those who had been disillusioned and broken, but who were yet gathered together in solidarity, *in* their brokenness. We must not forget that the disciples, despite their ignorance and their inability to get things right, were finally brought together in their destitution and suffering. They had finally gotten it right! And so Jesus was then, and *only* then, able to appear in their midst, wherever two or three were gathered in his name, in solidarity with their brokenness and the brokenness of those others with whom they stood.

## Closing remarks

I have often contemplated D.T. Suzuki's Zen Buddhist perspective on suffering as it calls me to reconsider my desires to avoid suffering. From his perspective, if faced with a choice between heaven and hell, Suzuki opted for hell so that he might be with those who are suffering, to somehow alleviate a portion of their suffering in the world beyond this world. His solidarity therefore did not end with his death; rather his life, even a life *beyond* death, extended itself beyond the boundaries of this world so that we might shoulder the pain of another, might too exhibit some degree of charity, in whatever worlds we might someday exist. This drastic choice calls me, in painful ways that desire to reckon with my own selfishness, to reflect upon my own eagerness to achieve something like a permanent state of security, or comfort, or a justice that will be lasting and incontrovertible, extending itself into the afterlife as well, as it does for many Christians pining for heaven. But, of course, we have no such guarantees that this is how things will be, despite the lovely cosmic portraits of harmony and ultimate justice that the biblical account seems to give us at certain points.

I have no doubt that many western notions of the afterlife are more than likely a political projection onto the blank screen of the afterlife, a world where our enemies are finally, justly, put in their place, and where our friends are eagerly awaiting us in the golden mansions we somehow deserve. Such visions, I think, say more about how we configure the borders and boundaries of our world than about any reality of a life after death, and yet these fantasies persist because we want them to persist, we need them to persist, just as we sustain the fantasy of a sovereign deity who controls everything and causes everything to happen 'for a reason'. When we study closely the eschatological considerations of Jesus, we see that he intended the Kingdom of God to *not* be just some

final state of existence, but a reality humanity could make present, even if perpetually incomplete as the Church is, in the here and now. We see bonds formed through solidarity because one is capable of standing with others who are broken.

The call to put aside our desires for the afterlife as a state of permanent security is parallel, I believe, to the call to poverty—something that Christianity has not been reticent to declare, though it has been unbelievably reluctant to embody.<sup>19</sup> We might simply note, for example, the extreme difficulties that arose within the Church when Saint Francis of Assisi took seriously the notion of poverty, elevating this call in opposition to material possessions which were to be used, but not owned in a strict, literal sense. Such detachment from material goods is not unrelated to suffering; indeed, the intersection of suffering and poverty is more pronounced than many of us, living in affluence, would like to notice. Franciscans, to this day in fact, realize that their vow of poverty is a form of social solidarity with the poor, those who suffer due to their involuntary poverty. To take seriously our call to a life of poverty—even and especially as it is embraced as a ‘poverty of spirit’—is to embrace likewise certain forms of suffering, the loss of what we thought we had possessed even, so that we might stand in solidarity with others who suffer in their poverty as well.<sup>20</sup>

To see things this way opens up the discourse of suffering to new levels, including a new perspective on the question of who gets to suffer and who gets to publicly mourn and grieve. In very stark terms that reflect how minority groups are often kept at a certain distance from public grieving—how, for example, certain crimes against the citizens of white America are often publicized and mourned publicly more than those in the black community, among other marginalized groups—reveal how social, economic and ethnic or racial privilege dictates a good deal about how suffering is portrayed and received culturally. Certain stories of suffering are privileged over others and therefore to be seen as politically and socially important while others are not.<sup>21</sup> What we are forced to witness at the present moment in terms of inequalities within our healthcare systems and amongst those who don’t have the privilege of working from home should make clear just how vulnerable certain portions of our global population are.

What are we willing to do in order to take part in alleviating the suffering of the world? Will we walk with Christ along the Stations of the Cross in order to suffer with him, and to potentially embrace the suffering of others? Or will we reject the suffering of others because it makes us have to face our fantasies and come clean about our own brokenness and poverty?

One of the biggest obstacles to talking about suffering is that the very question of why we suffer and how we should respond to suffering exposes our lack of understanding—how we do not completely understand the suffering that another person goes through. The constant confusion and misunderstandings that surround the dissemination of information swirling continuously around us should indicate not just a

---

<sup>19</sup> I elaborate on this point in more detail in my forthcoming book. DICKINSON, Colby H. *Theological Poverty in Continental Philosophy: After Christian Theology, ‘Political Theologies’*. London: Bloomsbury, 2021.

<sup>20</sup> See METZ, Johann Baptist. *Poverty of Spirit*. Trans. John Drury. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1968.

<sup>21</sup> BUTLER, Judith. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London: Verso, 2004.

failure of communication and a lack of scientific knowledge—they indicate a desperate attempt to flee from our own vulnerability.

This reality often leads too to us attempting to say things in the face of suffering that we should rather not say, leading to trite and empty phrasings like ‘Everything happens for a reason’, or the like, phrases that detract from the reality of the situation and foreclose any available vulnerability between persons. It also leads some among us to hide behind their political views or their scientific knowledge (neither of which are necessarily or inherently bad) as if these were able to protect them. And this is the real problem we encounter when we try to fill in the void and silence of our isolation conceived through our vulnerability with our desires to control the uncontrollable and understand what cannot be understood: *our inability to respond to suffering, to give an adequate answer to its problematic, is what actually gives us the vulnerability necessary to connect with those who suffer, and to stand in solidarity with them.* This is a task that motivates beyond whatever crisis we are currently facing—and there will always be one to face—so that we might enact new possibilities for living together with those who are most vulnerable. The true source of hope for many lies in this very place.

I will close with a poem by the Nobel Prize winning poet and German Jew from the early Twentieth Century, Nelly Sachs, a woman acquainted with suffering in ways that I cannot imagine, but whose words inspire me still:

I do not know the room  
where exiled love  
lays down its victory  
and the growing into the reality  
of visions begins  
nor where the smile of the child  
who was thrown as in play  
into the playing flames is preserved  
but I know that this is the food  
from which earth with beating heart  
ignites the music of her stars—<sup>22</sup>

## References

- BUTLER, Judith. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London: Verso, 2004.  
METZ, Johann Baptist. *Poverty of Spirit*. Trans. John Drury. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1968.  
MOLTMANN, Jürgen. *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*. Trans. R.A. Wilson and John Bowden. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1993.  
NOUWEN, Henri J. M. *The Road to Daybreak: A Spiritual Journey*. New York: Image, 1988.  
ROBBINS, Jeffrey. *An Insurrectionist Manifesto: Four New Gospels for a Radical Politics*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2016.

---

<sup>22</sup> SACHS, Nelly. *O the Chimneys: Selected Poems, including the verse play, Eli*. Trans. Michael Hamburger et al. New York: FSG, 1967. p. 232-233.

SACHS, Nelly. *O the Chimneys: Selected Poems, including the verse play, Eli*. Trans. Michael Hamburger et al. New York: FSG, 1967.

SIEDENTOP, Larry. *Inventing the Individual*. London: Penguin, 2015.

SOELLE, Dorothee. *Suffering*. Trans. Everett R. Kalin. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1984.

STEVENSON, Bryan. *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption*. New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2014.